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THE PALACE OF DREAMS

No one would think of it as a Palace of Dreams. Even I quite misjudged it at the beginning. I called it merely a moving-picture show. Yet I had watched the thing from its inception. Last year it was an old-book store—a decaying Dream-Palace which had outlived its age. Then came the auction-placards, then a dismantled store front, then a shell of boards which burst, cocoon-like, to reveal this gorgeous butterfly. What a triumph of the builder's art! What color, what aureate refulgence in the new façade! But its glories passed away like the splendors of the dawn; Winter stripped the Temple of half its golden bloom. Æolus came, defiant even of her who guarded it—the aureate goddess who had sprung full-armed from the brain of the jovial stucco-man; Æolus raged, and the dreaded javelin fell from her hand upon the head of a blue-coated son of Mars. Not being injured in the least, it was replaced the day after; but as no further attempt was made at restoration in the crumbling portico, no one to-day would guess that it was really a Palace of Dreams.

The change was not without its moral lesson. “*Les Dieux eux-mêmes meurent*,” I reflected, in the blessed post-prandial interval when all good pagans burn incense to the gods. Sprawling in a chair before the window, I basked in the smile of the statue until, like Vice in the fable, she became a familiar thing. A Heraclitean busied in blowing smoke rings, I accepted philosophically her susceptibility to decay. But after all, was this really a decaying shrine? Decrepitude indeed had smitten the Immortal, but undeniably her crowd of worshippers was every day increasing. Did they find some inner beauty, some spiritual comeliness, in the rite whereof she was merely the grosser symbol? And musing constantly on the Olympian, hypnotized perhaps by that brazen eye and beckoning hand, I, who had long decried her worshippers, was drawn one fateful day into the Venusberg itself.

The temptation was too strong. It probably began with the posters, worthy of study as any Dutch or German Primitive. That day, they told me, the comic muse had decreed the rite.

A propitious time for comedy, surely: gray skies and muddy pavements and pedestrians wincing under a driving rain. For rain only multiplies Thalia's votaries, and all the morning a motley procession of umbrellas had folded its wings and disappeared behind the swinging doors. Curious, the influence of Jupiter Pluvius upon the sons of men. When skies are clear they may pause awhile, study the posters, hesitate and yield to the call of the shop-windows outside. But the rain sends them into the theatre with undivided will.

Something of all this, perhaps, might well enter into my apologia. At any rate I paid my nickel with the rest of them that day, and with the rest of them I groped my way into the Temple. And then began my conversion. The seat was hard, but I soon forgot it. The hall was stuffy, but it ceased to irk me. As a dilettante of artistic experiences, I wanted to be properly psychologic. But alas, within five minutes the play had drowned out all thought of self-analysis, every discomfort, every impression or memory of another world. Seeing is believing they say; and all my senses merged in sight, I believed as stoutly as any Mahometan. I knew at last the secret of the shrine. Here, for a few coppers, one might obtain a real indulgence; here was fair weather, oblivion of care and worry, oblivion of self—O miracle, a sort of divine anæsthetic, a new anodyne, dispensed by the genii that moved upon the screen.

Yes, the moving-picture show is a form of dream-pedlary. Who in this age of fact, would not purchase dreams? It is a kind of hasheesh, like literature and all the other arts. Is it an art, this tawdry melodrama, these wordless plays and short stories of those who will not read? Is it an art, this crude reflection of the stage, which sacrifices all the harmonies of speech and color and atmosphere to give us in their stead only a vibrating photographic reality? Well, if the essence of art is illusion, this form of the dramatic illusion is surely art.

But no unimaginative pen may write the æsthetics of the cinematograph. If still in doubt upon the subject, you have merely to confront the fair glass-cased automaton—who looks so very like a model in wax—deposit your nickel and thrust her pasteboard 'open sesame' at the keeper of those green baize

doors. Within, you may witness a Western drama of the frontier days, its heroine a sweet little centauress who most heedlessly allows herself to be carried off by the red men. Not a very original subject, even in Homer's time. But note the rapt attention as the climax approaches, the fixed postures in the audience about you, the eager eyes, the straining hands. Low words of sympathy or encouragement escape the children, and sometimes, when the cavalry intervenes at just the proper moment, the very walls of the theatre are shaken by a burst of applause. Curious, isn't it? Of course, even the little ones know the unreality of the *Deus ex machina*, but the horror of their illusion calls for the relief of clapping hands.

This indeed is the real drama. Here, on these close-set rows of seats, the focus of emotion is so intense that even the cynic must feel its pulsing force. If you are blasé, if you have "travelled in those realms of gold" and found there nothing to justify the cowboy classics of the smoking-car, you don't need to look at the screen. Look about you! For these boys and girls, as for many children of a larger growth, the Far West is still the Land of Romance—Eldorado—unsubdued by railroads and tax-collectors and Sunday newspapers. Beguiled to-day into the Palace of Dreams, you may be accosted on your exit by a small but eager newsboy, counting his pennies before the poster. You may even be asked, as I was, "Mister, are there Indians in it?" and that question will put your skepticism to shame.

Indians—well, possibly, Indians might be said to constitute an æsthetic canon. They at least typify popular requirements in art. Red men or wild beasts, death or danger in some form—why, even Homer recognized that factor in the epic. Everyday urban existence is so tame, so dreadfully secure. To be sure, we have our six-cylindereed Juggernauts, our murdered pedestrians, but pshaw—such really interesting things never happen to us! What we want consequently, all-too sophisticated cliff-dwellers that we are, is to get a taste of the primitive, to flee with Odysseus from Polyphemus' wrath, to be shipwrecked on some Circean shore, to fight barbarians on the borders of the world; or failing these, to struggle at home with such minor catastrophes as might be deemed worthy of a full-page headline in the evening

paper. Indians—that is precisely the canon we need, just as the jaded Romans needed their gladiatorial football games.

Those who work hard must dream vividly. It is life that forces the note, after all. Modern life, with its breathless strenuosity, calls for the highest pitch that the imagination will allow. Well they know this, the dream-pedlars, and right cunningly do they mix their draughts. Danger, adventure, strife must each enter in: love too, compact of them all. Yes, there must be a Prince Charming in the Palace of Dreams, a lover, a Hero beset by difficulties no less than those of Odysseus of old. The ancient formula of Greek Romance survives, but here at least no conspiracy may delay too long the ultimate triumph of our hero. A charming fellow, this modern Daphnis, perfectly safe because his picturesque remoteness precludes flirtation, and yet—doubt it not, oh trusting husbands and fathers—maids and matrons are everywhere studying the posters in order to make sure of seeing him again this afternoon! Personally, I know that it is none of my business; as an old bachelor, I can still wear my wrinkled tweeds and flaunt the philosophic beard. But a married man who can view complacently this horde of women must roll in imperturbable conceit.

No doubt, married men do not visit the moving pictures. Hard at work in their offices, they expiate in toil and sweat the wasted time of their better halves. A natural conclusion, but—wait until the play is over, and the hall reveals itself, a new Tartarus, in all its awful splendor. Ah! now you can see what the friendly gloom, beloved of malefactors, concealed; and you recognize in the seats around you a score of these martyred benedicts. And since it is now granted you to fight in the light, you can force them to explain their presence in this den of vulgarity. They will tell you that it helps digestion, or that it “clears up the brain like a baseball game.” All that may be true, but if you will sit beside one of them, noting his comments at the “psychological moment,” you may be led to conclude that considerations similar to those affecting their better halves are not entirely absent from their minds. Comely she is, surely; and after all, are such visions to be excluded from a comprehensive Palace of Dreams? Mahomet, constructing a Paradise for his followers, was wiser and more generous.

Not all of the spectators, moreover, are Mahometans. The old man with the snowy beard, so intent upon the picturesquely staged Irish romance, sees in the winsome heroine the sweetheart of his own youth; the boy beside him dreams with the triumphant lover of the day when he too will fetch his bride to a rose-bowered cottage of his own. The girls in the audience sit spell-bound; the women forget in their absorption even their neighbor's headgear. A few gallery gods may express crudely their appreciation of the *dénouement*, but none the less you feel that half of the audience find here their only escape from reality, their only taste of the infinite consolation of the Arts. To them the crumbling goddess is a Muse, and her ritual their only glimpse of Poetry.

Poetry and music, for the Palace of Dreams dispenses both. It is wretched music, but it supplies the words of the drama, makes it real by filling the idle ear with sound. A poor little German 'orchestra,' violin and piano, its strains are needed to complete the illusion, to build the dream-walls so closely that they shut out the insistent frescoes on either side. The music clothes the drama, reënforces it, carries its movements like a flowing tide, imitates the gallop of Milady's pony or the approach of the rescue train: but without that tinkling flood to bear it onward, it must be in truth a 'powerful play' whose interest proves strong enough to drown out the clicking of the machine. Complex as Wagner's operas, the 'movies' require the aid of a sister art.

Sophistication is of course the essence of all the arts which express the modern spirit. Thus form and melody are combined, and as if that were not enough to give an edge to the jaded palate, the latest cinema reënforces these by the addition of color. As yet, unfortunately, the 'movies' have no theorist, no Wagner, no Marinetti, to outline in prefaces and manifestoes the development of this final art. But even this does not appear to impede their progress. Plays are written especially for them, magazines are published, trains are wrecked and ships sunk, houses are burned, and for them, even more than for legitimate drama, are buskins sewn and false hair manufactured into wigs. Actors who raved at them are raving in them. Managers have made

over their theatres, and the public, tired of the Trust and its dreary realistic plays, now finds everywhere an alchemist who will turn copper into fairy gold. *Panem et circenses*—does not the cinema give to the poorest that other bread not made with hands? Sitting there in the narrow seat of the Palace of Dreams, lost in its illusion and living by proxy, the inquiring psychologist may not think of these things, absorbed as he is in a world of shadows. But when the green baize doors have closed upon the Vision, when the dream fades away in the cold white daylight, leaving behind it only an inspiration or a resolve,—when he is out in the street again, with real men and women dancing before his dazzled eyes, he realizes that the Palace of Dreams is an institution, an art, a fact in our too definite modernity. He may ever wonder at the symbolism of this new art, or murmur sentimentally with the trite and sentimental Omar:—

We are no other than a moving row
Of magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the Sun-illuminated Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show!

LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS.

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